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ABSTRACT

Noting that students write more freely if they feel confident about their spelling, this paper offers seven practical and effective ways that teachers can help their students become better spellers. The suggestions offered are as follows: (1) teach students that English spelling is systematic; (2) teach students which spellings are predictable; (3) teach students which spellings are not predictable, but are common; (4) teach students how to use a dictionary to find the spellings of words with unpredictable but common spellings; (5) teach students how to spell useful but irregularly spelled words; (6) teach students how to spell affixes and how to use affixation rules; and (7) provide students with appropriate spelling practice. The suggestions are suitable for use in conjunction with published spelling textbooks or with teacher-made materials and can be used with the whole class, small groups or individuals. Examples are included with each suggestion. (HTH)

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SEVEN WAYS TO IMPROVE SPELLING INSTRUCTION

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Spelling is frequently a problem for students at all levels--and for their teachers. However, when students write compositions in final form, they must use correct spelling. And when students feel confident about their spelling, they will write more freely because they are less afraid of making mistakes.

In recent years, much has been learned about the nature of English spelling and about how to teach students to spell. This paper suggests seven practical and effective ways that teachers can help their students become better spellers.

1. Teach students that English spelling is systematic.

The charge that English spelling is a chaotic mess is frequently heard (and frequently used as an excuse for poor spelling). But this is simply not true. Although sounds and letters don't correspond perfectly in English, the relations between sounds and letters are systematic. English spelling does make sense, and some of the sensibleness will be discussed below.

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If students understand that English spelling is orderly and patterned--and if they are taught the orders and patterns--learning to spell becomes a manageable task that students can expect to accomplish. Frequently, however, teachers must take the lead in teaching the systematic nature of English spelling, since textbooks often enforce the chaotic view, either explicitly or--by poor presentation--implicitly.

A word of warning: Though English spelling is systematic, the system is not a simple one. Nonetheless, classroom research has shown that students of all ages and abilities can learn the system of English spelling and can become successful spellers.

2. Teach students which spellings are predictable.

Many English spellings are quite predictable. For example, thousands of words have "short a" spelled with the letter a, as in hat, sample, alligator. Similarly, when the "b" sound is at the beginning or end of a word, it is almost always spelled with the letter b. When the "b" sound is in the middle of a word, it is spelled with either b or bb, and there are rules for determining which to use.

Some predictable spellings are more complex. The "k" sound provides a good example. The following are some basic rules for spelling the "k" sound:

- Before e, i, or y, the "k" sound is spelled with k: keep, kitten, sky.
- Before a, o, u, or a consonant, the "k" sound is spelled with c: candle, cold, cut, clown.
- At the end of a word after a short-vowel sound, the "k" sound is spelled with ck: stick.

- At the end of a word after a long-vowel sound or after a consonant, the "k" sound is spelled with k: week, ask.
- The sound combination "kw" is spelled with qu: quiet.

While older students might review all of these rules at once, younger students should learn one or two at a time. Experience has shown that even first graders can learn and apply basic predictable spelling rules.

Students best learn how to use predictable spellings when the rules for the spellings are presented directly and clearly. For example, both oi and oy spell the same sound; students can be told the rule for choosing between these two spellings:

Use oy at the end of a word (as in boy).

Use oi in the middle of a word (as in boil).

Students can practice applying such rules by simply filling in blanks with the correct choice:

Complete these words with either oi or oy.

t__l s__ c__n R__

When students learn predictable spellings, they don't have to memorize a lot of individual words. Consequently, they can write more fluently because they can generate the spellings of more words.

3. Teach students which spellings are not predictable, but are common.

Here's where English spelling gets a bit tricky. Some sounds have a number of common spellings, but there are no rules for which spelling is correct in a particular word. For example, the "long e" sound is commonly spelled with ea, ee, e, ei, or ie. When a word has the "long

e" sound, one of these spellings is likely, although it isn't possible to be certain which one it is.

However, even when spellings aren't predictable, they aren't completely random. For example, these are some constraints on the spellings of the "long e" sound:

- Both ea and ee are very frequent, particularly in one-syllable words: heat, feed.
- In a word of more than one syllable, e is most common: even, frequency.
- The ei spelling is usually found in the word part ceive: receive.
- The ie spelling generally comes before ld, f, or ve: field, grief, believe.

Such constraints can help students hypothesize which spelling is most likely to occur in a word.

When students know what the predictable but common spellings are and when they know the constraints on the use of these spellings, they are likely to make fewer errors and to find the correct spelling more quickly in a dictionary--which is the topic addressed next.

4. Teach students how to use a dictionary to find the spellings of words with unpredictable but common spellings.

A dictionary is one of the greatest aids to correct spelling, but students need help in learning to use a dictionary for this purpose. Students should begin using a dictionary to aid their spelling as soon as they learn two unpredictable but common spellings for the same sound (for example, when they learn that "long e" can be spelled with either ee or ea).

To use a dictionary, students must first learn how words are alphabetized. However, locating words when the spelling is given is relatively easy for most students. The problem comes when they try to locate a word but don't know the spelling. "How can I find the word if I don't know how to spell it?" is a common cry from inexperienced dictionary users.

To help students learn to use a dictionary to find correct spellings, explicit instruction is needed. Such instruction makes use of words that students have in their oral vocabularies, but are unlikely to have encountered in print. The "long e" spellings can illustrate the procedure.

After students have learned that "long e" can be spelled with both ea and ee, the teacher says the word "twēt" (what birds say) and asks for two ways the word might be spelled--tweat and tweet. These two spellings are written on the board, and students look up each one in a dictionary. They won't find tweat, but they will find tweet; and now they know how to spell a new word--by using a dictionary.

This is the procedure that good spellers use when they need to spell a word they're not sure of. First they think of two (or more) ways the word might be spelled. Then they look up one of the spellings in a dictionary. If they find that spelling, they know how to spell the word. If they don't find the first spelling, they look up another spelling until they find the right one.

Students need to learn to use a dictionary routinely when they are writing. Few people know how to spell all words in English, so most

good writers keep a dictionary at their sides. On a first draft, writers may use their best guess at a spelling, but when they are preparing a final version, good writers check their spellings in a dictionary. Ideally, every student should have his or her own dictionary--even an inexpensive paperback dictionary. If dictionaries aren't available for individual students, then several dictionaries should be located in convenient spots around the classroom.

But students must be continually encouraged to use dictionaries, until the practice becomes natural for them. One of the best ways to encourage dictionary use is by example. Most teachers aren't perfect spellers, and they can show students the value of dictionary use by using dictionaries themselves.

5. Teach students how to spell useful but irregularly spelled words.

The suggestions presented so far have been based on the regular, systematic nature of English spelling. Unfortunately, English spelling isn't completely systematic--some words have irregular spellings that just can't be predicted on the basis of sound. For example, the au spelling of "short a" in laugh and the eo spelling of "long e" in people are quite irregular--that is, they occur very infrequently. Some irregular spellings occur in only a single word; some occur in two or three words. Researchers estimate that 5-10% of English words contain irregular spellings. That figure may seem high, but fortunately many irregular words are very common words. Students see these words so often in their reading that they usually have no trouble spelling them; for example, of, who, was.

If students are aware of predictable spellings (suggestion 2) and of unpredictable but common spellings (suggestion 3), they will more easily recognize irregular spellings. Then they can memorize the words with these spellings and can know that the spellings shouldn't be used in other words.

6. Teach students how to spell affixes and how to use affixation rules.

Affixes are prefixes (like un-, re-, mis-) and suffixes (like -ing, -ly, -ion). Students should learn to spell affixes as separate units that can be added to words. Sometimes affixes can be added directly to words; for example, mis- + spell + -ing = misspelling.

However, changes in spelling often take place when affixes (particularly suffixes) are added to words; for example, run + -er = runner, make + -ing = making, happy + -ness = happiness. Fortunately, affixation rules--the rules for making spelling changes when adding affixes--are very regular. And they are easy to learn. In classrooms where affixation rules are taught directly, students can successfully spell affixed words in their writing.

The rule for doubling final consonants is one such straightforward rule that can be easily taught to students. This is the basic rule:

> When a word ends in CVC,* double the final consonant before adding a suffix that begins with a vowel:
>
> hit + -ing = hitting
>
> sad + -est = saddest
>
> bag + -age = baggage

*This rule does not apply when the final consonant is x, w, or y, because x represents two sounds ("ks") and final w and y spell vowel sounds. In words of more than one syllable, the rule applies only when the last syllable is stressed (accented); e.g., preferred (vs. answered).

After students learn such a rule, they need considerable practice in adding suffixes to words so that use of the rule becomes automatic. For example, students can practice doubling final consonants, as opposed to making no changes or making other changes:

hop + -ing = hopping	vs.	hope + -ing = hoping (The final e is dropped.)
bat + -er = batter	vs.	beat + -er = beater (No change since beat ends with VVC.)
fat + -er = fatter	vs.	fast + -er = faster (No change since fast ends with CC.)
sad + -en = sadden	vs.	sad + -ness = sadness (No change since the suffix begins with a consonant.)

When students learn affixation rules, they can apply them to hundreds of words needed in their writing--writing that will contain more correctly spelled words.

7. Provide students with appropriate spelling practice.

Students need plenty of practice when they learn to spell--and this practice should be appropriate for what they are learning. All too often textbooks provide practice in copying, not with actual spelling. Although copying can be helpful, students must practice spelling words when the words are not in front of them since this is the goal of spelling instruction--to help students spell words independently in their writing.

When students are learning new spellings (or reviewing old spellings), they need practice in visual and oral discrimination. While students with normal vision and hearing can see and hear words, their spelling can be improved if they are consciously aware of the visual and auditory components of the words they are learning to spell. (Some of the suggestions below are common practices in reading instruction, but they are also valuable in spelling instruction. While these two language arts areas can complement each other, students need to practice visual and oral discrimination specifically in relation to their spelling words.)

Visual discrimination can be practiced by the teacher writing words on the board and asking questions about the letters in the words. For example, the teacher can ask these questions about the word still:

What's the first consonant cluster (blend)? (st)

What's the vowel? (i)

What's the last consonant spelling? (ll)

When students can answer such questions, they have better awareness of the visual components of the words they are learning to spell.

Oral discrimination is especially important at the beginning stages of spelling instruction. Teachers can say pairs of words and ask for same-different judgments:

Do these words have the same middle sound?

set - sat (no) bad - ham (yes)

fat - mat (yes) fan - bed (no)

As students learn more complex spelling, the questions can be more sophisticated:

> Do these words have a long-vowel sound or a short-vowel sound?
>
> hit (short) still (short)
>
> kite (long) time (long)

With such oral practice, students become more aware of the sounds in words. This awareness helps when they spell the words.

A note on dialect: Students who speak certain dialects may use different sounds in words--or may not use certain sounds at all. This may also be true of students whose native language is not English. When people (adults as well as children) do not say a certain sound, they may not hear that sound either. For example, many people pronounce these word pairs the same and consequently do not hear any differences between the words: tin-ten, wear-where, still-steal, bow-bowl. Trying to force people who do not say such sounds to hear the sounds may be futile. Therefore, visual-discrimination practice is especially important for speakers of certain dialects and for non-native speakers of English.

When students have had practice in visual and oral discrimination, practice in **spelling individual sounds** is very important. This is an example for spelling the "long a" sound:

> How do you spell the vowel sound in these words?
>
> fall (al)

make (a and then e at the end)

pay (ay)

After students can spell individual sounds, they can put the sounds together to **spell whole words**; for example:

How do you spell the first sound in fail? (f)

How do you spell the vowel sound in fail? (ai)

How do you spell the last sound in fail? (l)

Now, how do you spell the word fail? (fail)

Although considerable oral practice is important, students should also have a great deal of **written practice** with new (and review) spellings--but without the words in front of them, so they must depend on their own abilities. Items for practicing individual sounds may be pictures:

[picture of sheep] [picture of leaf]

sh__p l__f

Or items for practicing individual sounds may be sentences:

We chew food with our t__th.

We must leave early to get a good s__t for the movie.

Similarly, pictures and sentences may be used as items for spelling whole words:

[picture of sheep] [picture of leaf]

_____ _____

We chew food with our _____.

We must leave early to get a good _____ for the movie.

Practice in spelling whole words (but not copying words) is very important if students are to become independent spellers. However, such exercises are not tests; rather, they are opportunities for practice. With good, appropriate practice, students can increase their spelling ability.

Conclusion

The seven suggestions presented above can help students become better spellers. These ideas can be used in conjunction with published spelling textbooks or with teacher-made materials; they can be used with the whole class, with small groups, or with individuals. When teachers use these suggestions, they will find that their students become better spellers and--since this is the goal of spelling instruction--better writers.

Some Useful Readings About Spelling

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